By: Kat Cohen, a College Admissions Counselor Featured on HuffingtonPost.com on 09/18/2012 5:09 pm Last month, the 2012-13 edition of the Common Application was released. Simultaneously and/or soon after, many schools released updated supplements, several of which request at least one additional essay (in addition to the personal statement and activity essay required on the Common App).

As college admissions becomes more competitive, and more students are applying to more schools, colleges are increasingly using a student's "soft factors," including letters of recommendation, interviews, resume, and essays to transform an applicant from a series of numbers into a living, breathing human being.

Colleges don't ask you to write essays because they want to make you miserable, they are asking because they want to hear from you! They want to get to know your background, interests, goals, triumphs, failures, likes, and aversions in your own voice. When reading an essay, an admissions officer will try to determine: Who are you? Will you make a valuable contribution to your our campus community? What type of character traits do you possess? Are you responsible? Shy? Creative? A Leader? A nonconformist? How have you shown your intellectual vitality?

In order to properly plan your time in the coming months, first read through each application that you plan to submit to determine the number and nature of the essays you'll have to write.

Let's take an average college list with 12 schools for a high-achieving student who wants to study business:

- Five reach schools: University of Pennsylvania (Wharton), Cornell University (Dyson), Georgetown University (McDonough), New York University (Stern), University of Virginia
- Four target schools: University of Michigan, Babson College, Emory University, University of Southern California
- Three safe schools: American University (Kogod), Brandeis University, Bentley University

With this list, there are at least 20 distinct written responses!

Not only is there a large number of essays, but each requires a considerable amount of time, effort, and thought. Many schools want to know why a student is applying to that particular college. The "Why this college" essay is often the most important -- the dealmaker. Colleges want to know what you hope to gain from your education and also what you will contribute. There are seven such essays on this list of 12 schools.

For example, the University of Pennsylvania asks, "A Penn education provides a liberal arts and sciences foundation across multiple disciplines with a practical emphasis in one of four undergraduate schools: the College of Arts and Sciences, the School of Engineering and Applied Science, the School of Nursing, or the Wharton School. Given the undergraduate school to which you are applying, please discuss how you will engage academically at Penn."

Other colleges take a particularly creative approach to the application essay prompt with the hopes that students will reply in kind.

This year, the University of Virginia asks: What is your favorite word and why?; Brandeis University queries "A package arrives at your door. After seeing the contents you know it's going to be the best day of your life. What's inside and how do you spend your day?" and University of Michigan's Honors Program wants students to "Explain Unicorns."

These questions are tough. Ultimately, college admissions officers are trying to determine who they are inviting to campus and how you think. Regardless of how the question is phrased (many schools ask applicants to write about a quotation, literary work, or philosophy topic), be sure to relate the chosen material to your own ideas, outlooks, and aspirations. Dig deep - think about who you are, what's important to you, and what you want out of your education, and make sure that your essays accurately reflect those qualities.

Here are some additional tips for students writing their college essays:

- College admissions committees want to learn something about the applicant that they cannot learn from the rest of the application; avoid writing an essay that just reiterates the activities on your resume.
- Choose a single incident that defines who you are today and write a clear and creative

essay about it -- a story only you can tell!

- Gimmicks (such as writing your essay in a foreign language) rarely work and often make even more work for an already over-burdened admissions officer; "sob stories," topics of public consciousness, things that happened to you in middle school, and intimate details about your dating life are not good topics.
- Don't be afraid to write about being unsuccessful. Failure is usually a growth experience.

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